

**7. NIE 11-18.3-91, November 1991, *Civil Disorder in the Former USSR:  
Can It Be Managed This Winter?***



Director of  
Central  
Intelligence

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# **Civil Disorder in the Former USSR: Can It Be Managed This Winter?**

National Intelligence Estimate

*This National Intelligence Estimate represents  
the views of the Director of Central Intelligence  
with the advice and assistance of the  
US Intelligence Community.*

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NIE 11-18.3-91

## Civil Disorder in the Former USSR: Can It Be Managed This Winter? ~~(C.N.F.)~~

*Information available as of 29 November 1991 was used  
in the preparation of this Estimate.*

*The following intelligence organizations participated  
in the preparation of this Estimate:*

The Central Intelligence Agency  
The Defense Intelligence Agency  
The National Security Agency  
The Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research,  
Department of State  
The Office of Intelligence Support,  
Department of the Treasury  
The Director for Intelligence,  
Department of Energy

*also participating:*

The Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence,  
Department of the Army  
The Director of Naval Intelligence,  
Department of the Navy  
The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence,  
Department of the Air Force  
The Director of Intelligence,  
Headquarters, Marine Corps

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*This Estimate is one of a series to be published in the coming weeks on various crises facing the former USSR.*

*The multiplicity of problems facing the governments and their limited ability to cope with them make it likely that one or more of these problems will take on "worst case" proportions. (C NE)*

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## Key Judgments

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### Civil Disorder in the Former USSR: Can It Be Managed This Winter? ~~(CONF)~~

- Severe economic conditions, the fragmentation of the armed forces, and ongoing interethnic conflict this winter will combine to produce the most significant civil disorder in the former USSR since the Bolsheviks consolidated power. ~~(CONF)~~
- Directly targeted and administered Western assistance would improve Russia's chances of maintaining stability through the winter, but the odds of preventing a social explosion that would overwhelm or topple the government depend most critically on Yel'tsin's ability to manage painful reforms effectively. ~~(CONF)~~
- Yel'tsin's performance thus far is mildly encouraging: he apparently will not restrict credit and spending so rapidly as to result immediately in massive unemployment and bankruptcies. But his mishandling of price liberalization—causing panic buying by announcing it in advance—demonstrates the potential for further mismanagement that could lead to the collapse of his government and, with it, prospects for reform. ~~(CONF)~~
- Because of less severe food shortages, Ukraine's prospects of remaining stable through the winter are good as long as it continues to avoid significant friction with Russia. The impact of civil disorder in other republics will vary, but all would eventually be seriously affected by instability in Russia. ~~(CONF)~~
- All republics will resort to some authoritarian measures to cope with unrest, but Russia and Ukraine at least will avoid a heavy reliance on coercive force that would generate intense opposition and hasten political destabilization. ~~(CONF)~~

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**Figure 1**  
**Potential Areas of Unrest**  
**in the Former Soviet Union**



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## Discussion

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During the winter months, the likelihood that civil disorder will be sufficient to destabilize governments at all levels will be higher than at any time since the 1920s. Mass demonstrations, strikes, violent protests, and even acts of terrorism are probable, given the severe problems that each republic, especially Russia, must grapple with over the next four to five months.

~~(C-INT)~~

### Likely Flashpoints

#### Where?

Over the next few months, differing degrees of unrest will occur in virtually every republic of the former USSR. Of these, civil disorder in Russia represents the greatest danger to stability in the region by virtue of Russia's size, influence, and resources. ~~(C-INT)~~

Those areas of Russia most likely to experience serious unrest include the two largest cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg; industrial cities of the Urals, such as Ekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk), Perm', and Chelyabinsk; and rebellious regions, such as the Tatar, Checheno-Ingush, and Yakut Autonomous Republics. ~~(C-INT)~~

Yel'tsin's performance in managing the economic reform process will be critical. Liberalizing prices, cutting defense expenditures, and shutting down loss-making firms are all essential to restoring stability to the economy and laying the groundwork for its recovery. Moving too rapidly to curtail government spending and commercial credit, however, could cause bankruptcies to skyrocket and unemployment to soar by winter's end. Yel'tsin, therefore, has strong incentives to avoid so hasty an approach. He must also avoid the kinds of counterproductive actions and

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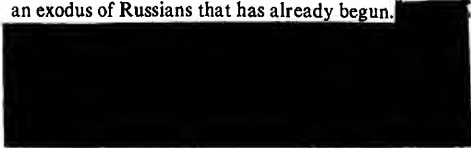
statements he has made occasionally in the past. By announcing in advance that price controls would be removed, for example, Yel'tsin sparked panic buying that emptied store shelves and increased social tension. ~~(C-REF)~~

Lingering "independence euphoria" and less severe food shortages will give Ukraine a better chance than Russia of remaining stable through the winter months. Serious energy shortages, however, will probably cause some social unrest. In addition, tensions between ethnic Ukrainians and minority Russians are likely to increase to some degree as the Ukrainian government acts to consolidate independence. Inter-ethnic frictions would intensify significantly if Kiev—contrary to its current policies—tried to impose discriminatory language and citizenship laws on Russian-populated areas, or if regions with large Russian populations attempt to assert their autonomy. Areas that face the greatest potential of unrest include Crimea, where 67 percent of the population is Russian, and the Donbass mining region, where difficult economic conditions will aggravate relations between Ukrainians and the large minority of Russians living there. ~~(C-REF)~~

Perceived mistreatment of ethnic Russians in Ukraine would worsen relations between the governments of Ukraine and Russia. Such a development might rally a majority of each republic's population to support its government, but, over time, any breakdown in bilateral cooperation would have an even more destabilizing economic and social impact on both republics. ~~(C-REF)~~

Outside of Russia and Ukraine, the extent of civil disorder will vary, depending on economic conditions, ethnic rivalries, and political traditions. Food shortages and unemployment will generate some unrest in parts of Central Asia, although authoritarian governments and the relative lack of organized political opposition or economic pressure groups are likely to inhibit protest efforts, at least in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. ~~(C-REF)~~

Interethnic conflict is a more likely source of destabilizing civil disorder in Central Asia, especially if sizable and relatively privileged ethnic Russian populations become the targets of discrimination, protest,

or even violence by resentful Central Asians. Such actions would accelerate and make more destabilizing an exodus of Russians that has already begun. 

Ethnic tensions elsewhere will also trigger civil disorders this winter. The Transcaucasus region is already on the verge of civil war. The simmering conflicts between the government of Moldova and Russian and Turkic minorities in the breakaway Dnestr and Gagauz regions also are likely to flare up. ~~(C-REF)~~

### Who?

Besides dissaffected ethnic minorities, civil disorder is most likely to involve the groups most affected by economic hardships. ~~(C-REF)~~

**Military Personnel.** While central control of the military remains largely intact, servicemen are growing increasingly intolerant of abysmal housing conditions, food shortages, and insufficient incomes. Some individual officers, groups of soldiers, or even regimental units already have threatened to disobey central command structures. They could look for governmental allies at the republic or local level, in some cases begin foraging for food and supplies, and possibly become powers unto themselves. ~~(C-REF)~~

Ferment in the military is already creating extraordinary situations. On 15 November, for example, the first "strike committee" in the armed forces was established in Ukraine, threatening protest actions in support of economic demands. ~~(C-REF)~~

Perhaps the greatest potential for unrest will be among military personnel scheduled to be withdrawn from Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, where conditions are relatively comfortable. *Representatives of officers' assemblies of military units stationed in the Baltic states have already threatened not to leave until better conditions are created for them at the new places they will be stationed.* ~~(C-REF)~~

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**Workers.** Increased labor unrest is certain. Striking workers in the energy and transportation sectors would have the greatest impact. Coal miners demonstrated their power last spring when they staged strikes that forced major economic concessions from the central government. If anything, worker disgruntlement is even more widespread now:

- Labor organizations, many of which are opposed to marketizing reforms, staged a "week of united trade union actions" this fall aimed at pressing Russian Republic authorities to increase wages and improve living conditions.
- Medical workers held demonstrations and "warning strikes" throughout the Russian Republic on 13 November to protest miserably low wages, unbearable working conditions, and shortages of critical medicines.
- A Moscow students' trade union committee recently appealed to Yel'tsin to increase funding for higher education, warning that the "slightest delay" could be "the catalyst that sparks off a social explosion among students." ~~(S-NT)~~

**The Unemployed.** As unemployment grows substantially, it will hit industries across the board. At least half of those thrown out of work will probably come from defense plants in Russia and Ukraine. Other heavy industries, such as ferrous metals, will also be hit. Republic governments probably will be unable to cope with an avalanche of demands for help from unemployed workers. Under such circumstances, protest actions are inevitable. Although the unemployed lack organization at present, they are a likely target of mobilization by organized political or economic groups. ~~(S-NT)~~

**Consumers.** Consumers are long accustomed to scarce and shoddy goods, but food and fuel shortages combined with skyrocketing prices of many essential goods could finally push them over the edge. Like the unemployed, consumers lack organization. Moreover, those who will suffer the most economic pain—pensioners, the disabled, and children—are least likely to engage in direct protest action. ~~(S-NT)~~



Рис. Н. КИНЧАРОВА.

Figure 2. Cartoon published in Izvestiya depicts man with sign: "Hunger strike against starvation." He is leaning against the door of a produce store with a sign affixed that says "no goods." (U)

Nevertheless, spontaneous protests, riots, and violence are probable in shopping places as tempers reach the boiling point. For example, police were recently called in to restore order at one St. Petersburg store when customers trying to buy low-priced eggs went on a rampage after finding that the shelves had been emptied. Many such frustrated consumers will join mass rallies and demonstrations organized by other protesting groups. Adept handling by the authorities will be critical in determining whether such protests remain just a letting-off of steam or become truly destabilizing. ~~(S-NT)~~

#### Impact on Stability

No one knows whether the Yel'tsin government can survive the winter. We believe that there is some possibility that it will be overthrown or simply lose its authority, due mainly to government mismanagement of the economic reform process. ~~(S-NT)~~

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On balance, however, Yel'tsin's statements and actions give grounds for modest optimism that the Russian government will not be destabilized. Faced with the prospect of growing unrest, we believe Yel'tsin will take steps to defuse or inhibit it:

- He has already boosted the wages of state-funded workers in an effort to ease the pain of the transition to a market economy. Although he will proceed with the liberalization of prices on most commodities, he probably will not curtail credit and spending so rapidly as to cause widespread bankruptcies and massive unemployment in early 1992. Such steps might preserve short-term stability at the expense of long-term economic health, however.
- Yel'tsin is willing to curb democratic practices in order to maintain stability. He will most likely make selective use of executive rule to deal with local unrest. He is less likely to adopt more sweeping strong-arm measures in an effort to buy time to administer harsh economic medicine. *As the recent "state of emergency" debacle in Chechnya-Ingushetiya illustrated, Yel'tsin would encounter serious difficulties in carrying out emergency decrees.* Moreover, it would alienate his most important political constituencies and jeopardize his political position. ~~(C-NT)~~

The reaction of the military to requests from civilian authorities to suppress civil disorder in the Russian Republic will depend greatly on the circumstances of each case. On balance, however, we have serious doubts that Russian-dominated military forces would be reliable instruments in using deadly force against fellow Russians. ~~(C-NT)~~

Besides economic factors, stability in Ukraine depends in large measure on the zeal with which the government moves to affirm its independence. Ukrainian government policies probably will strain relations with minority Russians and further the disintegration of the Soviet armed forces. Military units and officers stationed in Ukraine will face increasing pressure to decide whether their loyalties extend to Moscow or to Kiev. Combined with deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, such pressures will almost certainly deepen turmoil within the military and increase the danger that renegade units will appear. ~~(C-NT)~~

Outside of Russia and Ukraine, the prospects for destabilization vary:

- Byelorussia's ex-Communist leadership has at least a 50-percent chance of surviving the winter, despite deteriorating economic conditions that will probably produce widespread unrest. Over time, it will be undercut by radical economic reforms in Russia, and labor unrest similar to that which hit the republic last April would follow.
- Georgian President Gamsakhurdia faces intense political opposition, as well as resistance to Georgian rule in South Ossetia and the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic. But his continued popular support—he was elected overwhelming by direct popular vote earlier this year—and his dictatorial methods probably will keep him in power, at least over the next few months.
- The bloody dispute between Armenians and Azeris over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh already is threatening to escalate into a civil war. That outcome would be ensured if the USSR Interior Ministry Troops are removed, a likely prospect if efforts to form a political union languish.
- Central Asian republics—especially Kazakhstan and, to some extent, Kyrgyzstan—probably will be relatively quiet this winter. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are more likely to experience instability in the near term. ~~(C-NT)~~

All republics would eventually be affected by the destabilization of Russia. Most republic governments would seek to protect themselves by turning inward and imposing authoritarian rule. In most cases, these responses would fail to stem internal unrest. ~~(C-NT)~~

Directly distributed Western assistance this winter, especially emergency food and medical aid targeted to major cities, would probably help increase the prospects for stability. Such aid, delivered by airlift and administered by Westerners on the ground, would have the greatest chance of circumventing distributional roadblocks—the most likely cause of severe food shortages. Aid programs that rely on internal

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*There is some chance that conditions will not be as bad as this Estimate depicts and that civil disorder will not be as widespread. Several factors could inhibit massive political protests:*

- *A reservoir of support for Yel'tsin exists that transcends the immediate performance of his government. This could inhibit civil unrest—at least among ethnic Russians within Russia—so long as he is seen as playing straight with them.*
- *Russians, as well as other ethnic groups, have a long history of enduring conditions almost unthinkable in the West. While there is a breaking point, our analysis may err in assuming that the population is closer to it than it actually is.*
- *Winter conditions in most of the former USSR are hardly ideal for massive outdoor rallies and demonstrations. (CNE)*

*In addition, the black, gray, and new legal markets may be more effective than we expect in taking up the slack:*

- *We are uncertain how much has been diverted into these channels as well as how much individual citizens are hoarding; the amount undoubtedly is more than official statistics suggest.*
- *As prices are liberalized, more goods could become available throughout the country than we now anticipate.*
- *We may not account sufficiently for the deal making—barter, theft, selling of services, and so forth—that citizens have historically used to survive amid shortages. (CNE)*

distribution systems will have little immediate impact on shortages and run the risk of increasing the level of public unrest, as news would spread of clogged storage and transportation facilities, spoilage, black-market diversions, and theft. (CNE)

*Going From Bad to Worse*

Several developments are possible that would increase the chances of destabilization of governments beyond the level already discussed, especially if they occurred in combination. While some are more likely than others, we believe that none is probable in the next four to five months:

- Yel'tsin's death, especially by assassination, would probably throw the Russian government into chaos, strengthen centrifugal forces within the Russian Republic, reduce the prospects for successful inter-republic cooperation, and lower the odds that economic reform and democratization—long-term guarantors of stability—would be successfully implemented.
- Russian economic "shock therapy" could be so poorly conceived and unevenly implemented that it produces hyperinflation and unemployment far higher than we now anticipate and seriously aggravates interrepublic trade problems.
- An attempt by individual republics, especially Ukraine, to seize control over military assets on its territory would accelerate the disintegration of the armed forces and create the potential for a dangerous conflict.
- A large number of refugees crossing republic borders to escape interethnic strife or economic conditions would place new demands on the already insufficient resources of republic governments. (CNE)

Widespread civil disorder in the next few months would deal a deathblow to current efforts to cobble together interrepublic institutions. At best, republic governments will be too preoccupied with their internal difficulties to devote time or energy to interrepublic negotiations. At worst, economic stringencies and ethnic feuding will bring to power xenophobic nationalist groups advocating "go-it-alone" policies. (CNE)

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